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ABSTRACT

This paper, commissioned for the development of the national report, "National Excellence: A Case for Developing America's Talent," examines the relationship between American culture and efforts to educate gifted and talented students. The paper presents a historical overview of the cultural forces that have affected public policy, reviews the conflict between equality and intellect, and examines public education's attempts to educate gifted students. A lack of respect for achievement, effort, and merit in American schools and culture is noted. The ideas of de Toqueville, Locke, Binet, and Terman are cited to help explain the cultural forces influencing the education of gifted children. Three challenges for American policy makers are identified: (1) the need to make American culture supportive of efforts to develop the talents of young people; (2) the need to reform schools so that the needs of students who have "a curiosity and taste for achievement" are challenged and a less restrictive view of talent is adopted; and (3) the need to make able students "visible pace-setters within their schools" and to make schools more challenging for a broader spectrum of students. (Contains 40 references.) (Author/DB)

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ED 372 585

American Culture and the Gifted

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Daniel P. Resnick and Madeline Goodman in American Culture and the Gifted examine the relationship between American culture and its efforts to educate gifted and talented students. The authors present an historical overview of the cultural forces that have affected public policy, review the conflict between equality and intellect, and examine public education's attempts to educate gifted students. The lack of respect for achievement, effort, and merit in American schools and culture is described, and Resnick and Goodman discuss the tension between the cultural values of attitude toward intellect and deviance. The ideas of de Toqueville, Locke, Binet and Terman are cited by the authors to help explain the cultural forces influencing the education of gifted children.

Resnick and Goodman conclude by identifying three challenges for American educational policy makers. The authors believe that educational leaders need to make American culture supportive of the efforts to develop the talents of its young people by recognizing their achievements. The second challenge is to reform schools so that the needs of students who have a "curiosity and taste for achievement" are challenged and a less restrictive view of talent is adopted. The third area of challenge is the need to make able students "visible pace-setters within their schools" and to make schools more challenging for a broader spectrum of students.

This essay is about the relationship between cultural patterns in American life and our nation's response to the challenge of educating the gifted and talented. In the chemistry of that interaction between culture and policy lies some explanation for our faltering commitment to develop the potential of our most talented young people and to grant dignity to their dreams and ambitions. This relationship is difficult to explore. For while it is clear that our culture is dynamic and evolving, examining it requires one to label its central elements.

The difficulty of describing gifted education in America is compounded by problems of generality and definition. Discussions of policy must be broad enough to include the actions of school districts, states, and the federal government, but too much generality in the argument may deprive the reader of adequate focus. As to "giftedness" itself, there is no tight definition, no single agreed-on meaning. It is a flexible construct which is part of the debate over culture and policy.

Culture embraces the pattern of customs, beliefs and practices in a society (Childes, 1964; Hansen, 1975; Kluckhorn & Kroeber, 1952; Sapir; White, 1975). Although cultures are often characterized by great richness and variety, there are also strong sources of anthropological and historical literature that characterize cultures in terms of single dominant traits. Alexis de Tocqueville's (1883,/1983) description of American society in the Jacksonian period as a culture of equality belongs in this category, as does Norbert Elias' (1983) portrait of Old Regime France as a society based on the etiquette of deference and distinction. De Tocqueville's portrait of the United States as an egalitarian society with low levels of interest in education and

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intellect is a compelling one. But the American tendency to reduce social and intellectual distinctions does not exist in a vacuum.

What appears to characterize our culture as it educates the young is a tension between two quite different beliefs. The first is one that de Tocqueville identified in the 1830s when there were no more than five million Americans. In his eyes, the worth of individuals in American society was determined by what they made of themselves. There was no natural or inherited hierarchy, as there was in France, that could stand in the way of success for the industrious individual. Our support for common public schools at the elementary level was derived in some measure from that ideal.

The second value that has also influenced the public response to the education of young people, including the exceptionally able, is the acceptance of the inequality of natural endowments. Eighteenth century thinkers assumed that individuals were born with different capacities. During the Enlightenment, it was common for those who supported ideas of natural inequality to also support plans for public education. Thus, for John Locke, "Everyone's Natural Genius should be carried as far as it could. . ." (Locke, in Axtel, 1968). In the nineteenth century, however, theories of individual differences came to be linked with views of the domination of races, classes, and cultures. Individual differences were associated with rankings of power and privilege. Ideas about the natural superiority of races were used in the Atlantic world to justify the enslavement of Africans by those of European stock. Biological and geopolitical theories in the last few decades of the nineteenth century, part of the intellectual argument of Social Darwinism, supported the arguments about natural hierarchies, with serious implications for educational theory (Cravens, 1978; Kamin, 1974).

These two cultural currents were associated with competing views about whom our schools should teach, how they should teach them, and what resources to use in education. Out of the belief in equality stemmed support for elementary schooling, but under limited conditions. The programs of the common schools until the Civil War were largely confined to the basics of reading, writing, and arithmetic. Attendance in rural areas was sporadic; seasonal absences and voluntary termination of studies at the age of 12 or 13 was expected. A belief in natural inequality assumed that special opportunities would be needed by only a few who were privileged by family and circumstance—and that only this few could benefit from them.

In the tension between the two values, attitudes toward intellect and deviance were also forged. On the one hand, intellect was respected, particularly on its practical side where it could serve to generate wealth and position. On the other hand, intellect carried with it the stigma of deviance by assuming the superiority of a highly trained mind over even the most widely held opinions. Intellect was foreign to a society built on practicality and consensual understandings. It could be supported by a respect for natural differences in other cultures, but in the American setting the supporters of inequality were also driven by a preoccupation with the practical.

Giftedness in American schools, at least since the 1920s, has been seen as both a troublesome expression of deviance and a valuable human resource, playing out the ambivalent feelings about distinction that were clearly visible in the preceding century. The schools reflect the tensions within our culture surrounding both equality and intellect without offering a way to resolve them. Schools have devoted significant effort to identifying young people who are talented but have not found ways to respond to their needs. In general, school authorities have lacked the resolve to step up the pace of normal schooling to reduce boredom and have been equally remiss in not providing special and accelerated curriculum and instruction.

Public Policy Toward the Gifted

As a result of their capacities, gifted young people stand out in a culture that is wary of

differences. Their special needs can bring demands for differential treatment, and schools and policy boards have set about defining the conditions under which that can be justified. To this end, some educators have relied on the classic psychometric dimensions of verbal and mathematical aptitude classified for more than seventy years by intelligence tests. Others have looked for ways to recognize and encourage many different kinds of intelligence—among them the visual, musical and kinesthetic (Gardner, 1983).

Public support for special treatment of the gifted has changed over the years and has been far from even across state and district lines. The gifted, defined in some states and urban districts as those who excel in schoolwork, have had the opportunity for special treatment in their school programs in these states and urban districts for more than century. In the 1860s in St. Louis, Superintendent William Harris initiated a rapid promotion schedule for "bright pupils," a program widely emulated elsewhere. In the same era, the Regents of the state of New York introduced subject area examinations for entrance into academies. Only in the 1920s, when pencil and paper intelligence tests were first introduced in the schools for grade and program placement, did states and districts begin to define giftedness in the narrower terms of the verbal and mathematical aptitudes that those aptitude tests measured. Opportunities for rapid promotion, enriched programs, and special schools were all part of the response to this new conception of giftedness.

The first federal involvement in gifted education came in the 1930s, with the creation of an office on Exceptional Children and Youth in the U.S. Office of Education (Deleon & Vandenbos, 1985). The first major allocation of federal funding for the gifted in the post-war period came with the National Defense Education Act of 1958. Prompted by the launching of Sputnik, the act provided resources for the identification and guidance of gifted youths. A multitude of programs were created as a result of this initiative, but a sizable portion of them were eliminated when funding began to dwindle in the early 1960s.

In the mid-1970s, the federal government again began to show an interest in supporting programs for the gifted. The Education Amendments of 1974 included provisions for the establishment of an Office of Gifted and Talented in the U.S. Office of Education; authorization of an annual appropriation of up to $12.5 million; grants for training, research, and demonstration projects related to the gifted; grants to state and local education agencies for gifted education programs; and the establishment of a national clearinghouse of information related to the gifted and talented. Despite these efforts, however, as late as 1978 fourteen states still made no mention of gifted and talented children in their state codes or statutory language, and only an estimated four out of every one hundred gifted students had access to any enrichment activity in their school programs (Zettel, 1978).

By the early 1980s, the Office of Gifted and Talented had been closed and funding for gifted programs had mainly been merged into block grants to be used at the discretion of individual states. Later in the decade, sentiment again shifted as an Office of Gifted and Talented Students Education was reinstated and federal funding of gifted and talented programs was increased. Today, 47 states have legislation recognizing gifted and talented children, and 31 have specific standards to which state-funded gifted programs must adhere (Kleine, 1990).

Equality and Intellect: A Nineteenth Century Perspective

Examining the public environment in the early 1960s, John Gardner wrote: "the critical lines of tension in our society are between *emphasis on individual performance and restraints on individual performance*" (Gardner, 1961, p. 33). The notions that quality and equality represent trade-offs in our culture, and that the ideal of equality places limits on recognizing distinction, have visible roots in our nineteenth century culture. Among

the weaknesses of American culture identified in de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* (1833, 1983) was a tendency toward that 'middling standard':

> It is not only the fortunes of men which are equal in America; even their acquirements partake in some degree of the same uniformity. I do not believe that there is a country in the world where, in proportion to the population, there are so few ignorant, and at the same time so few learned, individuals. (p. 53)

Americans, according to de Tocqueville, admired and rewarded the inventive mind that concentrated on practical application of ideas. Rarely, however, did he see Americans engaged in more abstract levels of human knowledge or intellectual pursuits that tended to yield little tangible results in the physical world. De Tocqueville attributed these limits to the movement and pace of the democratic age, an age of "active life." Excessive value was assigned to "the rapid bursts and superficial conceptions of the intellect; and, on the other hand, [there was a tendency] to depreciate unduly its slower and deeper labors" (p. 165).

This "middling standard for human knowledge" was tied, in the French commentator's judgment, to the overwhelming power of popular opinion in American society. Other critics of our culture, historians among them, have extended de Tocqueville's argument. In *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life*, Richard Hofstadter (1970) writes: "Again and again . . . it has been noticed that intellect in America is resented as a kind of excellence, as a claim to distinction, as a challenge to egalitarianism, as a quality which almost certainly deprives a man or woman of the common touch" (p. 51). Such attitudes have had serious consequences for education in America where, Hofstadter continues, "vital segments have fallen into the hands of people who joyfully and militantly proclaim their hostility to intellect and their eagerness to identify with children who show the least intellectual promise" (p. 51)."

Equality, however, was more an ideal than a reality in Jacksonian America. The French observer was struck by the force of American political democracy, even though he did note the lines of race in our society (Drescher, 1968; Mayer, 1966). The reigning inequality in the distribution of wealth and power has been more fully explored by historians in the last quarter-century. Studies of social strife in the cities, slavery, and war against the Indian nations have highlighted the differences between the conditions of life of different parts of American society (McPherson, 1988). Although de Tocqueville's argument about our egalitarianism has not been sustained in contemporary American history, his judgment about patterns of conformity has been supported and extended. While social differences remained heated to the point of threatening violence, the underlying pull of many of the material changes in the society was toward increasing sameness in tastes and values.

The conformity of tastes, helped along in de Tocqueville's day by the absence of an established aristocracy whose preferences and eccentricities could resist public preferences, was supported in the second half of the century by the progress of mechanization and mass production. This was the age of the mass circulation of newspapers and magazines. The camera was invented, making it possible to mass produce identical images from a single negative. In the new department stores, retailers devised elaborate schemes to entice buyers to purchase mass-produced items, and buying and selling took on a cultural importance and form different from that in earlier times. There was a great improvement in material life for most of the population, but clothing and furnishings for most of the population looked more and more the same (Sennet, 1978).

Much of the pressure for standardization came from manufacturers and leaders in the top industries of the nation, particularly the railroads. Track widths had to be standardized to make rail travel across the nation possible. The needs of the railroad

industry and their customers, however, dictated a transformation much more profound than this—an alteration in time. Before 1883, every city in the U.S. had its own "local" time, based on its presumed relation to the sun. "Local" time played havoc with the needs of the transportation industry in setting train schedules. Railroads had to have their own time, registered on a separate clock in local train stations beside local time. The imposition of standard time, (which left the minutes hand on the clock unchanged between time zones and altered only the hour hand depending on whether one resided in the Eastern, Central, Mountain, or Pacific time zone) was, in effect, the process of imposing "railroad time" on the rest of the nation (Lasker, 1984).

Schools and the Gifted: The Formative Years

During the first decades of the twentieth century, the American educational system was experiencing unprecedented growth. Large influxes of immigrants in the quarter-century between 1890 and the First World War caused the country's population to grow from sixty-three million to over one hundred million, twenty times the population in de Tocqueville's day. At the same time, compulsory education and child labor laws were forcing more and more children into the schools. Additional school growth came as high school attendance became normative for those 14-18 years old. Elementary school enrollments increased by fifty percent, and attendance in the high schools increased five hundred percent. In a city like New York, in a single decade, 1900-1910, school enrollment increased 57 percent. More rapid promotion for the gifted was welcomed wholeheartedly as a policy by school administrators seeking to bring efficiency to their overpopulated schools.

Efficient management—associated with division of labor, assembly lines, and relatively undifferentiated products—meant reducing failure rates by placing students in adaptive classes appropriate to their abilities. The Russell Sage Foundation supported a study by former school superintendent Leonard Ayres (1909) to call attention to the problem of school failure. Ayres argued that too many students were overage for their school year, and repeated school failures were wasteful of school resources. Among his recommendations, Ayres proposed a curriculum "which will more nearly fit the abilities of the average pupil." Such attitudes created problems for the gifted who became more clearly identified as special and deviants in a school culture increasingly preoccupied with the mean, the middle, and the mass. Guy Whipple, writing at the end of the First World War on ways of responding to the needs of the gifted, noted that their needs had been placed in relief by "the mechanizing tendency of the graded school system" (1924, p.1).

The intelligence test helped school administrators to identify the gifted. An early version was designed by Alfred Binet in France to predict which children would be unable to succeed in school. It had to be individually administered and required two to three hours. Lewis Terman created an American version, the Stanford-Binet, which still required individual administration. In 1917, one of Terman's graduate students, Arthur Otis, resolved these problems by creating and norming a group pencil-and-paper version of the test. Used as the basis for the Army Alpha test on 1.7 million World War I draftees in 1917, it proved the feasibility of mass testing for school purposes.

The introduction of intelligence tests to establish giftedness did no great service to educators. For Lewis Terman and his generation, the gifted enjoyed their abilities as the result of natural endowment and not opportunities created by schooling. He remained highly skeptical of the value of research on ways in which child-rearing and early schooling influenced the emergence of talent, and his own studies of the life course of the gifted in the 1920s started with children who were already eleven years old (Chapman, 1988). For Terman, the function of educational psychology was largely

to place students of different abilities with their peers. Education became involved more with recognizing talents than with developing them.

A movement beyond the classification of students on scales of verbal and mathematical ability required a richer view of both the varieties of creativity and intellect in children and a more sanguine and constructive view of how schools could promote achievement. By 1930, some of the racial and ethnic bias associated with early school classification efforts had been recognized, and some of the leaders in the movement had recanted earlier racial positions (Cravens, 1978). There was also growing interest in the variety of aptitudes children might have. School structures, however, remained relatively rigid, and there was little effort devoted to using schools to promote achievement. Pennsylvania and New York Regent studies in the Great Depression showed the problems of low morale and achievement even among gifted students. Pennsylvania, for example, identified in a graduating class across the state a large number of very able students, more talented than many of their peers, who never continued on to college (Learned & Wood, 1938).

The paradigm for the identification of the gifted by intelligence tests was solidified between the two world wars, and a high test score remained the major or sole determinant of eligibility for participation in gifted programs in most states and districts into the early 1960s. Research studies presented to Congress indicated that until the end of the 1950s, schools were defining the gifted as those whose test scores were in the upper 2 to 3 percent and thus had a Binet I.Q. of 130 or more (Marland, 1972). Since the 1960s, criteria for eligibility have been broadened to recognize teacher recommendations and demonstrations of capacity and insight, particularly in the arts. These changes responded both to research on human differences and the political and legal battles over civil rights. Gifted programs were opened to more females and minorities, but the ambivalence about special opportunities for a small portion of the population persisted.

Post-War Culture, Schooling, and the Gifted

The period after World War II brought major strides in removing the worst forms of racial inequality and religious intolerance in our society. It also introduced Americans to a competitive world environment in which school success had some bearing on national strength. The Soviet Union's early success in launching the Sputnik satellite in the 1950s started a space race which had some positive short-term effects on academic programs particularly in science and mathematics. Those programs, in turn, opened up new curricular opportunities for the most able students in our schools.

A major innovation of direct interest to the most able students, operating without any necessary relationship to IQ scores, was the Advanced Placement (AP) program. The college level syllabus examination courses were introduced into the high schools in 1953 with the support of the Fund for the Advancement of Education. Their direction was later taken over by the College Board. Although only a little over 500 students in 18 schools took the syllabus examination program in its first year, the figure had increased to 29,000 by twelve years later. By the early 1980s, the number taking AP courses had risen to more than 120,000, and was increasing at the rate of 10 percent a year. In 1991, 42 percent of all secondary schools in the United States offered AP courses (AP Yearbook, 1990).

The AP program introduced a model of high-level work for the high schools that continues to influence discussions of standards, curriculum and assessment. The demands of the course program were clear to administrators, teachers and students, and within the means of most high schools. In the words of an evaluator of the programs, "There are few schools, public or independent, large or small, urban or rural, that could not institute Advanced Placement in one form or another and in at least one subject" (Copley, 1961, p. 33). Eligibility to

take the courses did not depend, in most schools, on IQ tests, but on motivation and teacher recommendation (Fenton, in Cohen, 1966). The AP program continues to grow, and what was introduced as a program for the gifted, has attracted students who want to "stretch" and learn to become achievers under conditions of high expectations. The College Board's Pacesetter Program for the 1990s is an effort to extend to a broader portion of the high school population a syllabus-backed course program with enriched forms of assessment.

Curricular efforts to enrich programs and accelerate student development have generally not received support from the tests that are now in use in the schools. The pencil and paper testing programs which have served to identify the gifted as well as the least able are not designed to help students learn. Nor do they encourage students to integrate knowledge, carry out projects, or keep records of their written work. Characterized by a view of knowledge that is decomposed and decontextualized, such tests have the effect of fragmenting learning. Unlike the examinations introduced by Advanced Placement, the most common forms of aptitude tests encourage no writing. It should be no surprise then, that as Applebee (1981) estimates, 97 percent of the writing that is done in secondary school English classes is a paragraph or less in length. The longest passage for reading comprehension in the standardized tests commonly administered to high school students is no more than 350 words, and most are shorter (Resnick, in Gifford & O'Connor, 1991). There are clearly negative consequences for the language development of all children in this kind of environment.

The assessment system within our schools lacks the external examination component common within the school systems of other nations (Cheney, 1991), Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate and the New York Regents examinations being the exception. External examinations in the school programs of European and Asian nations encourage those students to work for success in mastering the knowledge of a field and to demonstrate that knowledge through extended written and sometimes oral performance. Our system does not give our own most able students that opportunity for social recognition and it deprives culturally excluded minorities of a way to earn school success through hard work. The absence of equitable and universal standards for all students allows prejudices about minority potential to go unchallenged.

The inequality of school expectations for poor and minority communities exacerbates the low expectations for the school population generally. With low school expectations, there can be little hope of overcoming the deficits of our out-of-school culture, particularly in the area of language. Inequality of access to language is a serious impediment to the *development* of giftedness in children. Heredity is significant in shaping only part of the capabilities of the gifted, as a number of studies have shown; the other factor is environment (APA Monitor, 1991; Bouchard, Lykken, McGue. Segal, & Tellegen, 1990). Inequality of access to a rich language of practice is clearly tied to the conditions of poverty.

The number of poor children has increased in the last quarter-century, and their social status has deprived many of needed opportunities to grow in their control of language. Language is an instrument to develop a sense of power over environment and to communicate with others. Losses in the occasion to discover and practice language can thus stunt the development of talent. The declining practice of exchanges through language—oral and written—can be traced in the family, the community, and the school. As the occasions for sustained contacts with family members has declined, the much vaunted individualism of our society has expressed itself in boredom and solitude for many young people (Brice-Heath, in Lunsford, Moglen, & Slevins, 1989).

The growth of single-parent households, dual-career families and non-kin nonconjugal temporary households has removed and altered the nature

of family occasions for talking and listening to share experiences. Only 7 percent of American families in the mid-1980s had two parents with a working father and an at-home mother. In Csikszentmihalyi and Larson's (1984) study of 75 middle-class adolescents in the Chicago area in the late 1970s, as Shirley Brice-Heath (1990) notes, the teenagers spent a total of only about half an hour a week interacting with their fathers alone (on half of the occasions, a television set was on) and less than fifteen minutes a day interacting with their mothers (Resnick, 1990). Meals and outings together are becoming rarer, and those in the adult world who can model for their children the art of story-telling are fewer in number. Although these occasions are often thought of as ways of sustaining traditional family values, they should also be understood as occasions for language exchange that develop the sense of self and self-confidence of the young.

That decline has been mirrored in the reductive patterns of linguistic communication in the television medium, the most accessible literacy medium for the American population. While young people were not reading very much, not doing much homework, and not finishing high school in greater numbers (the rate of school completion, 75 percent, was the same at the end of the 1980s as it had been in the mid-1960s), their viewing of television did not suffer. Television, in turn, reenforced the pleasures of the spectator and intensified the exposure to the marketing of articles of mass consumption. Volumes have been written to protest the school-taught literacy of American young people, but the public literacy of mass consumption has just emerged as a matter of public concern (Sizer, in Lunsford, Moglen & Slevin).

Even in early summer, television sets are on for seven hours or more a day in 95 percent of American homes. About one-third of American households, more than thirty-five million of them, can be expected to watch a Super-Bowl with its bits and pieces of comment, logos and celebrations of the wedding of business, leisure, and bone-crunching ballet (Sizer, in Lunsford, et.al.). It is a rare event, by contrast, when more than a tiny percentage of television audiences will watch theater, in which the power of language is stretched to its fullest.

The fundamental inequality represented by the withdrawal of language opportunities from a large segment of our population is underlined by Joseph Brodsky in his acceptance speech for the 1988 Nobel Prize in literature: ". . .if it is still possible to find some purely physical or material grounds for the existence of social inequality, for intellectual inequality these are inconceivable. Equality in this respect, unlike anything else, has been guaranteed to us by nature. I am speaking not of education, but of the education in speech, the slightest imprecision in which may trigger the intrusion of false choice into one's life. . ." (pp. 27-32).

Toward a Respect for Achievement

The traditions of respect for effort and reward for merit in our culture are now poorly represented within the schools and better represented in the external community where children devote the hours of learning and practice to out-of-school activities—in music, dance, theater, technology, and sports. Consequently, students are unmotivated to perform in school. In this context, some models can be found for revitalizing high achievement standards in school. Something as seemingly common as the Merit Badge program of the scouting movement deserves our attention in this regard. In 1986, the national Boy Scout organization reported that more than 1.6 million different badges were earned by a little under a million enrollees, ages 11-17 (J.W. Dean, personal communication). Merit badges are offered in more than a hundred fields that include birdwatching, bookbinding and botany, and each certificate requires considerable study and a demonstration of learned competence before a proficient judge. Only a small portion of Scouts will have earned enough certifi-

cates to be eligible, with other requirements, for Eagle Scout status, but the goal and possibilities are extended to a very large number.

It is an expectation that the gifted will become bored and non-adaptive in our school system. This is well-illustrated in an episode recounted in a recent ethnography of preschools in three different cultures. Examining a videotape of a Kyoto preschool, an American early childhood educator Dana Davidson commented to Japanese teachers that the explanation for a child's obstreperous behavior might well be the result of giftedness. When asked what the concept of giftedness meant, he said the following:

> Well, by giftedness in the United States, we mean someone who is exceptionally talented in some area, like intelligence. Like Hiroki [the child in question] who seems to be so smart, so quick. He has such a bright look in his eyes. We would say that a boy like this has a lot of energy and is so bright that he is quickly bored by school. To me, it seems that his incidents of misbehavior occur when he has finished his work before the other children. He provokes his teacher and the other children in an attempt to make things more exciting, better matched to the pace and level of stimulation he needs (Tobin, Wu, & Davidson, 1989, p. 24-25).

The Japanese teachers rejected this explanation and insisted that Hiroki was of average intelligence like all the other children. The cultural anthropologist David Wu and his coauthors found little resonance for American understandings of giftedness and the problems associated with it in their discussions with the Japanese. They wrote: "We suspect that many Japanese preschool teachers and administrators we talked with found our questions about giftedness hard to understand in part because of their distaste for the notion of inborn abilities and their suspicion that the identification of children as having unequal abilities would inevitably lead to an unequal allocation of educational effort, resources, and opportunity" (Tobin, et. al., 1989, p. 24-25).

American rhetoric about giftedness has an archaic character to it, tied to late nineteenth and early twentieth century theories of inherited traits and social ranks, often masking a genuine concern for the full development of the child. In that mode, the rhetoric is as difficult for many lay Americans to accept as it was for these Asian teachers. The practical American response to evidence of unusual talent, however, has won a deserved amount of respect. It amounts to breaking the mold of everyday schooling practice for such children, changing their environment so that they can accelerate programs, attend complementary external classes, and enjoy more individualized learning opportunities. When Americans worry about what to do about the schooling of those they have identified as gifted, they turn away from conventional practice. That is also what they will have to do if they wish to *develop* the talent of our young. In that effort, our inherited culture, with its dynamic tensions, will not be the enemy of change.

Conclusion

American policymakers at work on education for the gifted and talented face three challenges that call for sensitivity to the limits and potential of our cultural environment. The first challenge is to find ways to make the culture of the society supportive of efforts to develop the talents of the young, within and outside of school, and to encourage the emergence of as varied a developed pool of talent in the society as possible. The second is to modify the program of the schools so that they can be adequate not only for the broad middle of students but also for those who have a curiosity and taste for achievement and individual effort which is not visible in the rest of the age group. The third is to make especially able young people the visible pacesetters within their schools so that others can take pride in their achievements and aspire to earn like rewards.

If the first goal is to make our culture supportive of the search for and development of talent, we

must understand the predisposing forces and habits, in the Burkean sense, that move Americans toward and away from respect for such goals. Although thoughtful critics of our culture, from de Tocqueville onward, have called attention to our aversion to distinction based on intellect, and to our drift toward a leveling kind of democracy, we believe that certain elements of our culture are also struggling against these tendencies. These elements support recognition of achievement and talent in ways that make our democracy more informed and more capable of survival.

If the second feature of the challenge is to make public education more adaptive to the varied talents of the young, we raise two caveats. Talent must be developed and not simply recognized. Talent speaks in a number of tongues; its arts are many. It is no longer credible to speak only of talent along the dimensions described by tests of mental intelligence. A restricted view of talent as an inborn and genetic property of races, cultures, or families, common from 1905 through 1925, is no longer an acceptable premise for American psychology. The nature-nurture argument has been resolved in a way that indicates a significant if not always determining role for environment—and therefore education—in the emergence of talent.

The task for education in a democracy is to maximize the capacity of talent to develop in as rich and full a way as possible. In order to reach out to the diversity of talent, it will be necessary to reshape broad patterns of schooling, and not just the programs dealing with those already identified as talented and gifted. Too narrow a focus risks denying the opportunity for development to those whose family, class, sex, race, or personality remove them from the ways of behaving that allow for early identification as talented.

Adaptation to individual differences in the interests of better education need not confine itself to the school environment. Across the nation, schools are working with libraries, museums, science centers, symphonies, universities and businesses to create adaptive learning experiences for young people. We have models in other nations for adolescent programs of part-time schooling and part-time work that have become appealing even to the strongest academic students. It would be unreasonable to assume that better solutions for the education of young people can be found by confining ourselves to the narrowest notion of institutional schooling.

Finally, we deal with the challenge of helping other students find common ground with the gifted. It is a common finding that bright young people, when confronted with ordinary schoolwork, tend to withdraw, become bored, and sometimes develop behavior problems. Ordinary youngsters, however, are also quite bored with school. As Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1984) described the experience of middle-class Chicago students in the late 1970s, school is a joyless and dispiriting part of their day. Easy access to education and an easy passage through school has been revealed as a demoralizing experience for the least as well as the most able. We are now at a juncture where we can place the experience of leveling in some historical perspective and seek out ways to restore the sense of challenge. This must be done, however, in ways that promise reward in more varied forms and for a broader portion of the school population than was done in the past. Our effort to broaden as widely as possible the opportunities for development of talent suggest that the search to create challenges in schooling should address a broad spectrum of public school students.

Gifted young people have emerged over the past century and a half, more as a challenge to the organization of the American system of education than as a special resource to be developed. That organizational system has, in turn, shown a great debt to nineteenth century culture and institutions. As we turn in the last decade of our own century to a reordering of the public system of education, many of those values and cultural patterns require reexamination. A way must be found to turn the constraints of the past into the opportunities of the present.

11

Attention to the needs of the gifted forces into sharp relief the way in which talent and effort have been recognized in public education. The gifted have been, for the most part, participants in mainstream patterns of curriculum and assessment. The deficiencies of these arrangements—their low expectations of effort and their inability to award achievement—are especially visible when examined from the perspective of the gifted, who demand challenging programs. Our attention to their needs, however, should not obscure the imperative of improving the overall school environment in which they work.

To a large extent, the fate of education for the gifted is tied to the general conception of public education. It is the character of our mainstream education that has excluded the gifted. The preoccupation with conformity to a broad middle, with middling down, is a long-standing one in our culture, and it has entered the ethos of public schools. When norms for performance are established in that way, the gifted are deviants. When, however, the expectations for learning and achievement of the broader school population are raised, we may expect a large improvement in the schooling and satisfaction of the most able. Until the broader norms of schooling reward effort and achievement, the most and least able will suffer together.

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